

Los Angeles Daily Journal

Assuring Underprivileged a Voice

Jurist Credits Parents for Strong Sense of Social Responsibility

By Tina Spee

Wednesday, October 2, 2002

Profile:

Laurie D. Zelon

Superior Court Judge

Los Angeles

Career highlights: Appointed by Gov. Gray Davis to Los Angeles Superior Court, April 2000; partner, Morrison & Foerster, 1991-2000; partner, Hufstedler, Kaus & Ettinger (and predecessor firms), 1983-91; associate, Beardsley, Hufstedler & Kemble (and related firms), 1977-82

Law school: Harvard Law School

Age: 49

LOS ANGELES - As an undergraduate at Cornell University, Laurie D. Zelon monitored campus demonstrations. A member of the only student-run chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union in New York state, Zelon worked to resolve disputes between students and police officers to help protect the public's right to peaceful protest.

Thirty years later, as a Los Angeles Superior Court judge, Zelon has added the public's right to a fair trial to the list of constitutional rights she works to preserve.

A former president of the Los Angeles County Bar Association, Zelon, 49, says her 30 years of public-interest work have allowed her to understand the legal needs of the underprivileged.

She emphasized "how important it is for them to feel that they're being listened to, that they have an opportunity to say what they need to say - for them not only to get a fair trial but to believe that the system is being fair to them."

The attorneys who appear before Zelon attest to the fact that counsel and clients in her courtroom have faith in her objectiveness.

"I can't think of a single client that hasn't had a fair hearing in front of her," Deputy Public Defender Noel Leon said. "She's fair to both sides. It sounds crazy, but that's not always how it is."

Described by the attorneys who appear before her as a consummate professional, Zelon projects quiet determination, intense intellectual curiosity, confidence and thoughtfulness,

on and off the bench.

"Her judicial temperament is excellent. She never gets ruffled," Deputy City Attorney Andrew Wong said. "I think she is a brilliant jurist."

Zelon has been a longtime advocate of equal access to justice for all and an outspoken proponent of increased, and more stabilized, funding for legal-services programs.

But as a newly assigned judge at the Clara Shortridge Foltz Criminal Justice Center, Zelon's day-to-day work no longer affects the public on such a broad scale.

She is an active member of the Court-Community Outreach Committee, the American Bar Association's Ethics 2000 Commission and the State Bar of California's Statewide Bench-Bar Coalition.

But her work on the bench affects the lives of the underprivileged, as Zelon puts it, "one by one."

"I can't be an advocate anymore in the way that I was, but there are lots of opportunities that I have found within the court that are appropriate to the ethical limits that judges have," Zelon said.

"I affect people's lives one person at a time in this job, but sometimes, the effect can be pretty profound, and sometimes, it's not what you hoped it to be," she said.

Zelon works to ensure that her misdemeanor court is a relatively welcoming place for the defendants she comes face to face with on a daily basis.

"I've talked to so many people over the years, either directly or through the reports from their advocates, about how alien a place the justice system can be, how unapproachable it can seem to them," Zelon said.

According to the attorneys who appear before her, Zelon succeeds in making everyone in her courtroom at ease.

"She treats everyone, from victims to defendants to attorneys, with the highest respect," Wong said.

"A lot of my clients really feel that they're not afraid to come to court because they know she'll listen to them, and they like her positive reinforcement," Leon said. "She becomes familiar with people who have been in court over and over. She actually cares."

According to Deputy Public Defender Debbie Canada, jurors also are impressed with the respect Zelon pays them and the gratefulness with which she thanks them for their time.

"She's very good with juries," Canada said. "She's very polite, and she makes them feel like their contribution to the system is important."

Zelon acknowledges that she makes an effort to ensure that jurors leave her courtroom with a sense of confidence in the organization of courtroom proceedings and the effectiveness of the trial-by-jury system.

"What I try to do, so I can get enough trial time and so that the jurors are used in a way that makes sense to them, is start trial by 10:30 in the morning," Zelon said. "When people are late, it makes it hard to keep things working in a rational fashion."

While unprepared lawyers annoy her, several things about the lawyers who appear before her impress Zelon.

"One of them is the ability to humanize the case, to take it out of this range of procedures and rules," Zelon said. "The second thing is getting in there, digging so hard so that they understand completely and exactly what the facts are. ... Those are the ones who really shine."

Zelon said her parents, an accountant and a housewife, gave her a strong sense of social responsibility.

"No matter what I ended up doing, I think I would have found some way within that profession to do public work, because that's what I was taught," Zelon said. "It was always a part of me."

She was born in North Carolina and went to high school in Westbury, N.Y. She received her bachelor's degree from Cornell University in 1974 and then attended Harvard Law School.

At Harvard, Zelon made history when her team won the Williston Competition, a contract-negotiating contest open to first-year law students at the school. It was the first time a team with a female member had won the competition.

In a class made up of 20 percent women, Zelon held the position of editor in chief of the Harvard Civil Rights-Civil Liberties Law Review. She also was a member of the Harvard Voluntary Defenders.

"It was an interesting time, and there were an awful lot of changes going on," she said. "People were always aware of the issue [of gender], but I was never denied an opportunity."

As a member of the New York Civil Liberties Union, she sat on the board of directors and discussed issues before the union, such as the proposed Nazi march in Skokie, Ill., in the late 1970s.

Shortly after earning her law degree, Zelon joined the American Bar Association's young lawyers division, where she served on and chaired several pro bono and public-service committees.

"I worked on ... helping to develop standards for pro bono programs, encouraging recruitment, getting law schools to talk more about pro bono, [and] getting law firms more involved in a [formal] way," she said.

She spent 20 years as a litigator, first at Hufstedler, Kaus & Ettinger in Los Angeles, where she combined her love of science with her passion for litigation as an environmental law specialist, and then at Morrison & Foerster, where the firm's large environmental group and other science-based divisions gave her room to expand her practice area.

Both firms allowed Zelon to focus on her private practice and do community service. During her career, she accomplished several things to improve legal funding for the poor, locally and nationwide.

- In the late 1980s, she became chair of the American Bar Association's Standing Committee on Lawyers' Public Service Responsibility, the group responsible for the association's position on legal services for the poor.
- During her 1995-96 term as president of the Los Angeles County Bar Association, Zelon appeared before Congress and successfully argued against its proposed elimination of the Public Service Corp., which grants funds to independent local programs that provide civil legal assistance to the poor.
- After being named chair of the State Bar's Commission on Access to Justice in 1997, Zelon worked with the state Judicial Council, the governor's office and members of the Legislature to establish a \$10-million-a-year legal-access fund for programs that deliver free legal services.

"The impact of her interest and work on the provision of legal services in the state of California is immeasurable," said Patricia Phillips, senior of-counsel for Los Angeles' Morrison & Foerster. "Its value is felt every day by someone who would otherwise be floundering around in the legal system yet dealing with very serious problems."

Zelon's public-interest work has not gone unnoticed. Several organizations that share her commitment to public service - including the National Legal Aid & Defender Association and the State Bar of California - have honored her.

Two years ago, Zelon received the Laurie D. Zelon Pro Bono Award, which had been named for her one year earlier by the Law Firm Pro Bono Project, which she'd helped found.

"I didn't find out until I was standing in the great hall of the Supreme Court, surrounded by 300 people who were there, that the award had been named for me and was thereafter going to be given in my name. It's very hard to believe, for anyone who knows me well, but I was actually speechless for a period," Zelon said.

Zelon faced one of the greatest challenges of her legal career, she said, when her appointment to the bench forced her to switch gears from civil litigation to criminal law.

"It was a steep learning curve for me," she said. "It's a whole different set of processes. The rules are different. The case law is a whole body unto itself."

Attorneys praise Zelon for her thorough understanding of the law.

"She's extremely well-versed in the law," Leon said.

"She's very thorough in her research," Wong said.

Of course, not all attorneys concur with every decision Zelon makes in court. Some city attorneys disagree with her interpretation of evidentiary statutes when Zelon puts limits on their use of hearsay testimony.

But lawyers who have appeared before her say that they appreciate her intelligent interpretation of the law.

"Her rulings always have a firm foundation behind them no matter which party is adversely affected," Wong said.

Zelon and her husband, certified public accountant David George, have two sons, Jeremy and Daniel, who are college students.

Her outside interests include skiing, reading and music.

Zelon considers herself lucky because she loves her position as a judge.

"Sometimes, when you want something a lot, there's this fear in the back of your head that, if you get it, you're going to be disappointed," she said. "I wanted this a lot, and I haven't been disappointed for a minute."

But something tells those who know her that Zelon won't stay put for long before she tackles a greater challenge, and the call that has driven her constantly to give back to the community moves her forward.

"I have a feeling that she's not going to be a misdemeanor trial judge for that much longer," Wong said. "She's slated for higher things."